

## The Eslington Sword and the Kingdom of Northumbria

Rob Collins & Sam Turner

To cite this article: Rob Collins & Sam Turner (2018) The Eslington Sword and the Kingdom of Northumbria, *Medieval Archaeology*, 62:1, 28-52

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2018.1451473>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 Jun 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# The Eslington Sword and the Kingdom of Northumbria

By ROB COLLINS<sup>1</sup> and SAM TURNER<sup>2</sup> 

*NEW DISCOVERIES* may indicate the location of a previously unknown early medieval burial ground in central Northumberland. Objects discovered during the course of metal-detecting include an assemblage with a folded, pattern-welded sword and zoomorphic shield mount. Excavation indicated near total destruction of deposits as a result of post-medieval land-use and only Bronze-Age burials inserted into bedrock remained intact. Three putative early medieval burials are identified here, with the largest assemblage associated with a high-status male. The sword and shield mount from this assemblage are comparable with finds from high-status burials in southern and eastern England. Together with the landscape context of the site, the assemblage provides evidence for the burial practices of an emerging Northumbrian elite in the late 6th century AD.

The Eslington sword<sup>3</sup> was one of several metal objects reported to the first author, then Finds Liaison Officer North East, for the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in 2010. The collection appeared to indicate a previously unknown area of early medieval activity through the presence of early Anglo-Saxon metalwork on the Eslington and Ravensworth Estate to the west of Whittingham, Northumberland. Initial assessment of the objects, which notably included a folded pattern-welded sword and an incomplete zoomorphic mount, and the general proximity of the findspots suggested a cemetery. Given the rarity of burials containing Anglo-Saxon metalwork in north-eastern England and the unexpected preservation of the sword, a brief excavation was undertaken in June 2013 to assess the potential survival of archaeological deposits. No intact strata dating to the early medieval period were identified, although two undisturbed cist burials of Bronze-Age date were discovered in situ. While the metal-detected objects are without a certain archaeological context, close inspection of the assemblage suggests that it signals the presence of high-status burials dating to the mid- to late 6th century — a period for which there is little evidence from Northumberland relative to other regions of eastern England.

The sword and the associated assemblage are significant for several reasons. First is the survival of a folded, pattern-welded sword and a number of other objects preserved within the corrosion of the weapon. The second is the recovery of an incomplete zoomorphic mount, almost certainly for a shield, which has a series of recesses in relief inset with cut glass. Other recovered objects indicate that this was a likely multiple weapon burial, comparable to high-status burials in southern and eastern England. The late 6th-/7th-century date places the assemblage in the period in which the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia coalesced to form the kingdom of Northumbria. The exact extent of both Deira and Bernicia are

<sup>1</sup> School of History, Classics and Archaeology, Newcastle University, NE1 7RU, UK. [robert.collins@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:robert.collins@ncl.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> McCord Centre for Landscape, Newcastle University, NE1 7RU, UK. [sam.turner@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:sam.turner@ncl.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> The sword was previously publicised as the 'Alnwick sword', taking the name from the District in which it was discovered, rather than the parish or more specific location. This was done to protect the findspot of the discovery, particularly as the sword was featured in ITV's second series of *Britain's Secret Treasures*. For the sake of accuracy the authors prefer the more precise 'Eslington sword'.

unknown, though Deira seems to have centred originally on the East Riding of Yorkshire and expanded to include the North Riding of Yorkshire; Bernicia may have originally centred in the lower Tyne Valley and/or Bamburgh and northern Northumberland with expansion taking in the rest of the modern counties of Northumberland and Durham.<sup>4</sup> The presence of 6th-century objects suggests this may be one of the earliest medieval burial sites known in the Bernician region. When considered in the context of current knowledge of Bernicia, the site is all the more striking. It provides evidence for the introduction of conspicuous burials similar to those used in other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in eastern Britain, and the conscious manipulation of the landscape to underpin territorial structures during the period when the new kingdom of Northumbria emerged.

### DISCOVERY AND LOCATION

Between 2009 and 2013, a local metal detectorist found and recovered more than 75 objects from the Eslington and Ravensworth Estate to the west of Whittingham, close to Alnwick in central Northumberland (Fig 1). The majority of objects date to the medieval and post-medieval periods with a distribution broadly reflecting domestic disposal, dispersal through manuring, and mixed casual loss. A distinct cluster of early medieval objects was recovered during repeated visits to two fields situated on the top of a low hill. Finds from the fields Reindeer Close and Plantation Field resulted in 19 new records on the PAS database (some comprising multiple objects and/or components of a composite object, with the exact number being uncertain: Appendix 1). The clusters of objects have been distinguished in this paper as Locations 1, 2 and 3.

The easternmost field, Plantation Field, has been used as pasture for many centuries and retains well-preserved earthworks that indicate the presence of a pre-modern farmstead with small blocks of ridge-and-furrow. Only four objects were recorded from this field, three of which are late-medieval or later in date (listed in Appendix 1). The most significant object from this field was a large fragment of a square-headed brooch in good condition (findspot designated Location 1).

The western field, Reindeer Close, has been subject to mechanical arable exploitation for many decades, though its name refers to an episode in 1786 when the field served as pasture for reindeer imported from Lapland.<sup>5</sup> In 1890, a large stone slab that had been obstructing the plough was removed to reveal a cist, the base of which was formed by the bedrock; no contents were found inside the grave. The cist was notably found ‘on the top of an earthen mound’ within the field.<sup>6</sup> The Ordnance Survey (OS) six-inch map of 1926 indicates the location of two cists in this field and an apparent ‘earthen mound’ can still be identified: it has the appearance of a prehistoric burial mound eroded by mechanised agriculture. Fifteen PAS records were created for objects from Reindeer Close, 13 of which are attributed to the early medieval period (Appendix 1; designated as Locations 2 and 3).

Neither the rectangular woodland plantation between the two fields nor the plantation west of Reindeer Close has been explored. Nevertheless, the following review of the artefacts discovered provides the basis for interpreting the ridge as an open site during the early medieval period.

<sup>4</sup> Rollason 2003, 45–6, 48, 50–1.

<sup>5</sup> Dixon 1899, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 7–8.



FIG 1

The location of the site: (a) in Britain, (b) in Northumberland, and (c) identifying the individual fields and Locations 1, 2, and 3. *Map by Alex Turner.*

## THE METAL-DETECTED ARTEFACTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

The following discussion focuses on the interpretation of the site. Descriptions and detailed interpretations of all individual early medieval objects can be found in Appendix 1, while further details and photographs are available on the Portable Antiquities Scheme.<sup>7</sup> Below, the PAS record numbers are given in parentheses and can also be used to locate the object descriptions in Appendix 1.

Location 1 produced a single find of early medieval date, the head of an incomplete great square-headed brooch (NCL-7268A8; Fig 2a). The brooch was found in pasture and

<sup>7</sup> <<https://finds.org.uk/>> [accessed 29 March 2018].

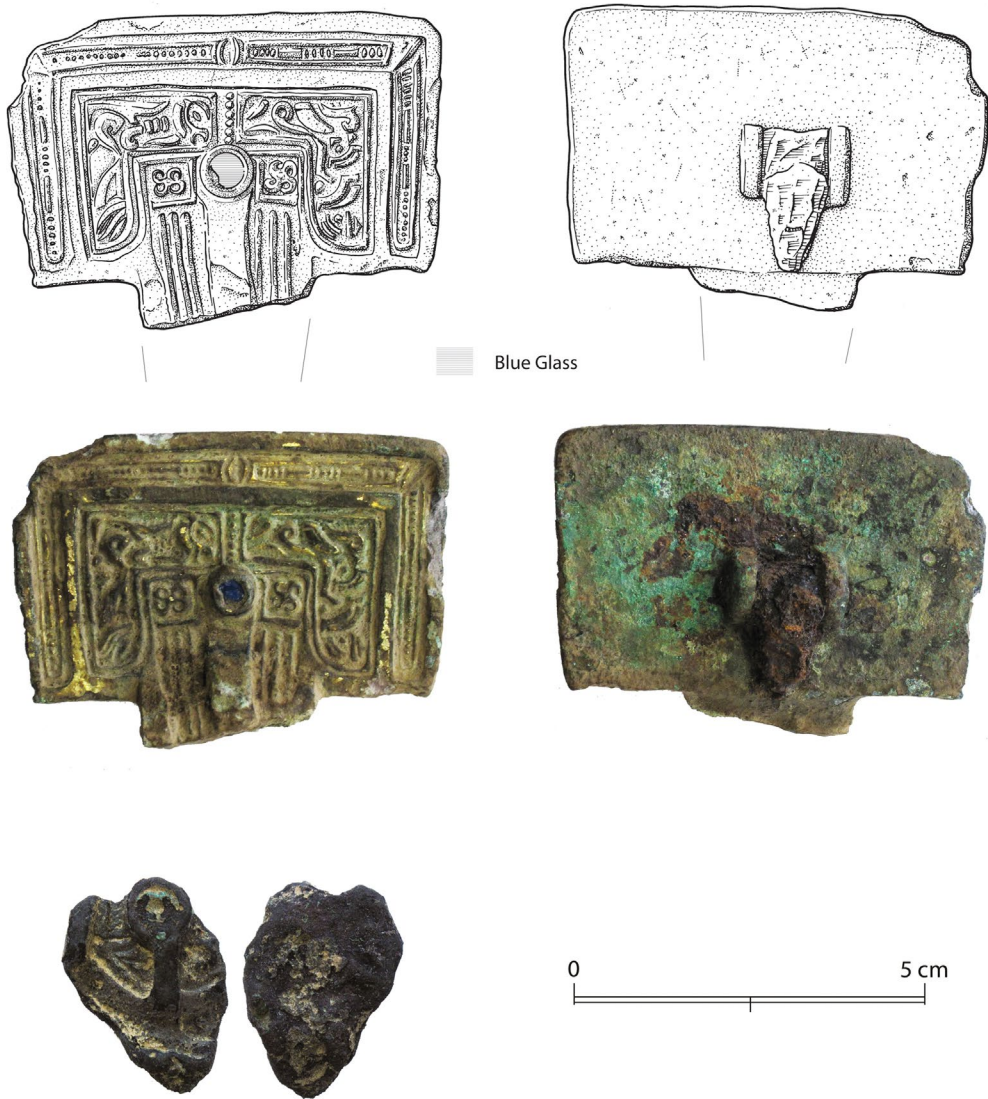


FIG 2

Photographs and line drawings of the square-headed brooch fragments from: (a) Location 1 and (b) Location 2. Drawing by Mark Hoyle. Photograph by Rob Collins.

is in a generally excellent state of preservation, retaining traces of gilding on the surface and a central glass inset. The brooch does not fit unambiguously into any established groups according to its decorative features,<sup>8</sup> and should be seen as typologically hybrid. The stylistic elements generally support a date of production in the mid-/late-6th century.

A second square-headed brooch (NCL-B35398) from Location 2 consists of a highly damaged copper-alloy fragment identifiable as the bow (Fig 2b). The damage is likely to be

<sup>8</sup> Hines 1997, 111–18 and pl 46b for Group 15, pl 45 for Group 14.



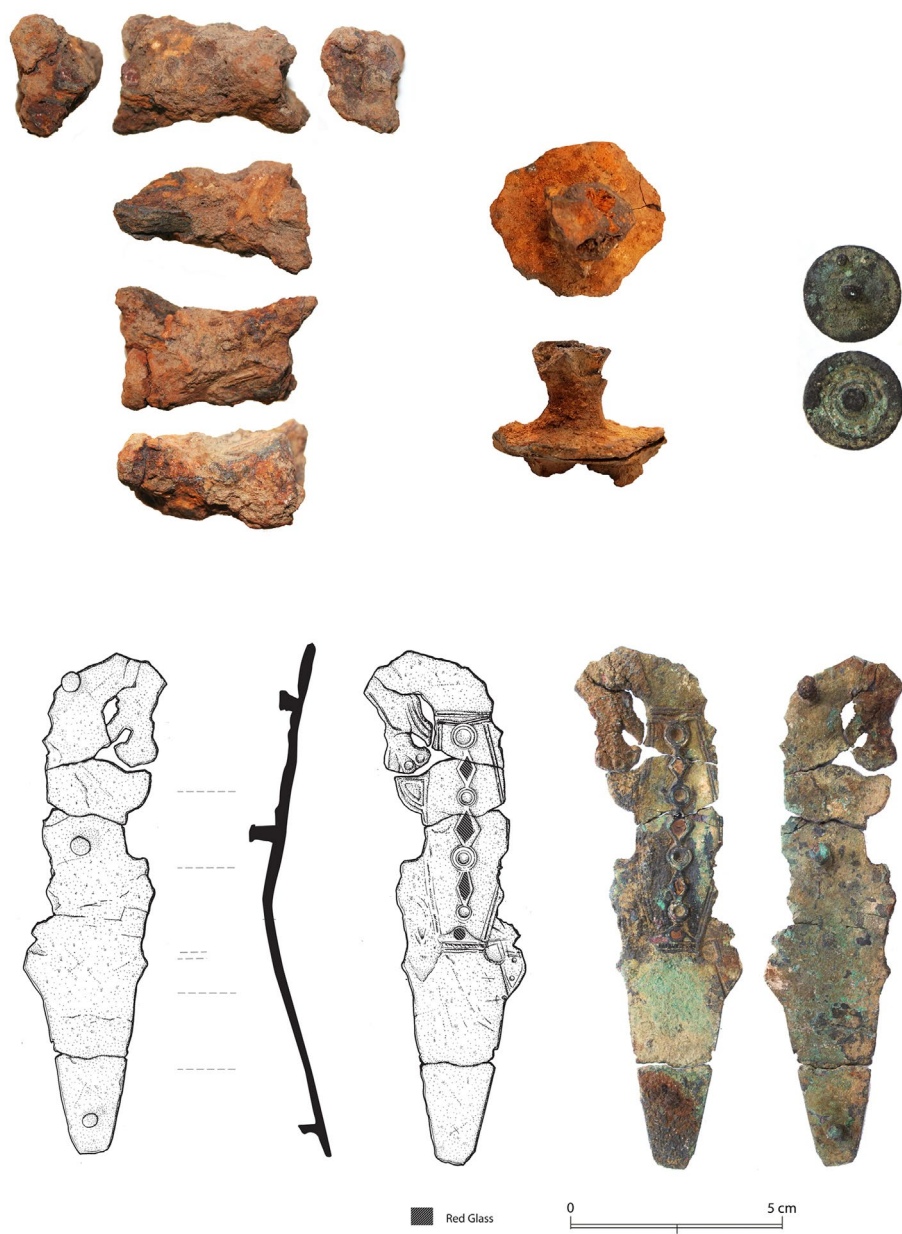


FIG 3

Objects associated with one or more shields at Location 3, including: (a) the iron shield boss, (b) a possible iron grip, (c) a copper-alloy stud, and (d) the incomplete zoomorphic mount. *Drawings by Mark Hoyle. Photograph by Rob Collins.*



FIG 4

The fragmentary iron remains of a large knife or narrow seax. *Photograph by Rob Collins.*

a result of fire. Stylistic features tentatively suggest a date of production in the early part of the mid-6th century.<sup>9</sup>

Location 3, east of Location 2 by approximately 15 m, yielded the most objects. Several of these PAS records almost certainly relate to a single original object, a shield, including the iron apex of a shield boss (NCL-7F11C1), a possible iron shield grip (NCL-7F3784), a copper-alloy stud (NCL-D97D06) and zoomorphic copper-alloy mount (NCL-B405D4) (Fig 3). Decorative elements of the stud and mount support a production date in the mid-6th to early 7th century (discussed in more detail below).

<sup>9</sup> Hines 1997, 80–93.



FIG 5

The iron agglomeration containing at least three spear butts, visible in the photograph, while the ring is partially visible in the photograph and fully visible in X-ray (not shown). *Photograph by Rob Collins.*



FIG 6

The iron agglomeration containing a ring (right), and the iron agglomeration containing a mount, three rings and a fitting. *Photograph by Rob Collins.*

Other objects found at Location 3 include a large iron knife (NCL-7F19D3) of probable mid-/late 6th century date (Fig 4), and a number of iron agglomerations that contain multiple objects, only some of which can be identified. One such agglomeration (Fig 5) contains at



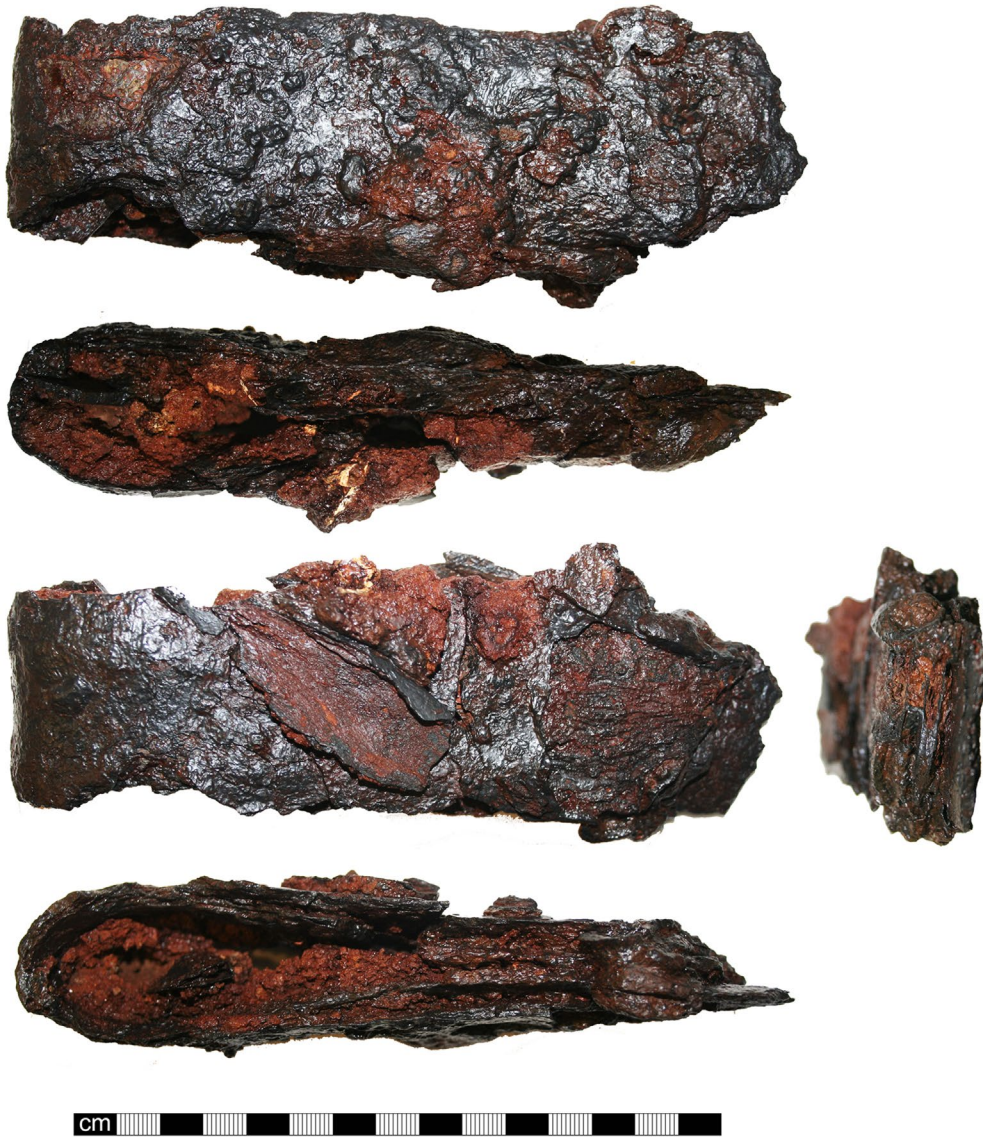


FIG 7

The Eslington sword and its directly associated objects. *Photographs by Rob Collins.*

least three conical spear butts (NCL-96F2A0) and a large iron ring (NCL-96C605). Another agglomeration contains a second iron ring (NCL-A6E027), and a third agglomeration holds two or three interlinked rings related to the mineralised outline of an attachment fitting (NCL-7F28C0; Fig 6). Two further agglomerations (NCL-7F4417 and NCL-7F3D46) almost certainly contain further objects not visible through direct observation or radiography. The

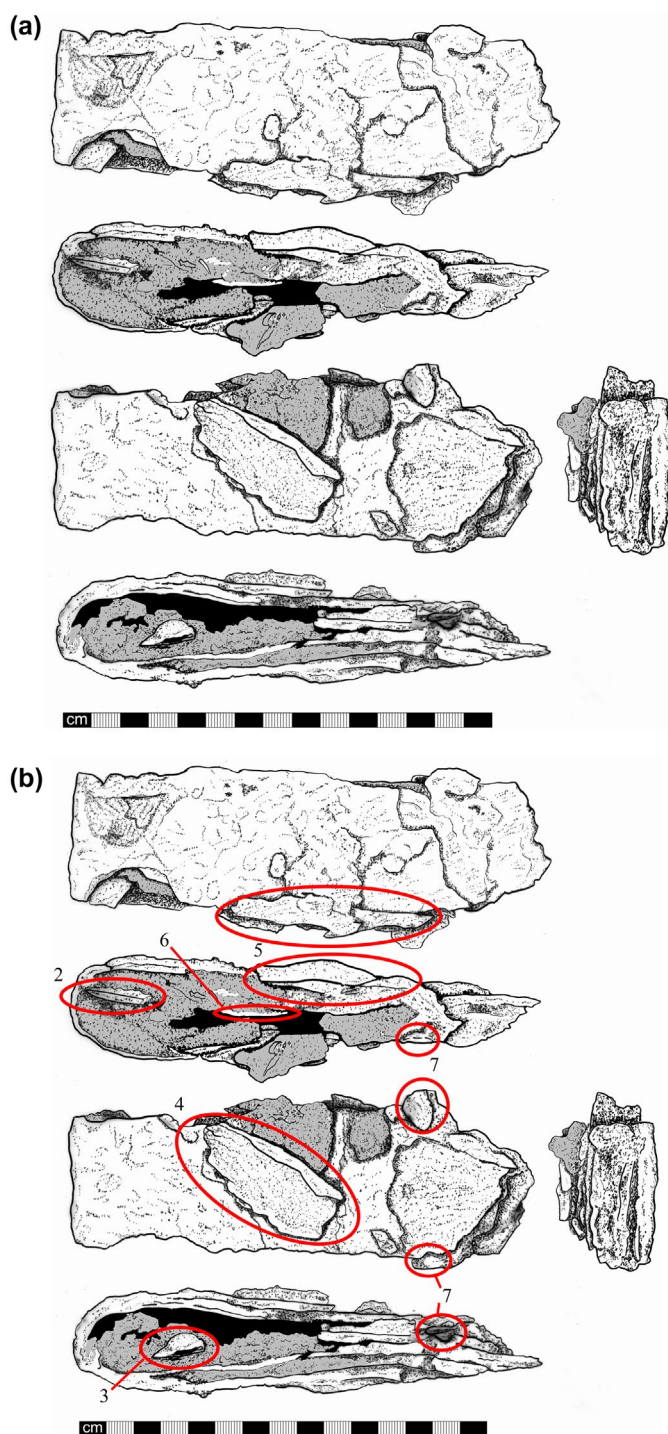


FIG 8

Drawing of the sword and assemblage (a), with, annotated version below (b). Numbering refers to descriptive entries in Appendix 1 below. Grey shading indicates mineralisation mixed with iron corrosion. *Drawing by Rob Collins.*

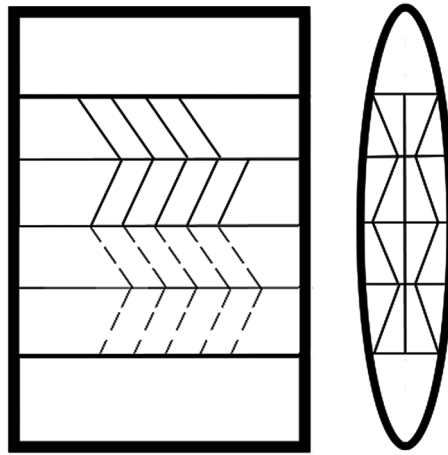


FIG 9

A schematic representation (not to scale) of the known structure of the pattern-welded sword, shown using four twisted iron-rods to illustrate the decorative effect and positional relationships between the rods used in forging the sword. A fifth central rod could change the decorative appearance, and it is possible that a core layer was placed in between the outer layers of four twisted rods. *Drawing by Rob Collins.*

function of the rings and fittings are uncertain and not closely paralleled; possibilities could include horse harnesses or feasting equipment such as a hanging bowl.

The most complex object found at Location 3 is a folded, pattern-welded sword (NCL-7EF795). A number of associated objects remain directly attached as a result of depositional circumstances, corrosion and other taphonomic factors (Fig 7). Most of the directly attached objects indicated in Figure 8 cannot be identified with certainty. They include the remains of an iron knife blade whose tip is still located inside a copper-alloy chape, with the whole placed crosswise through the loop formed by the fold of the sword. It seems likely that after being folded the sword was wrapped with the sword belt and associated objects, like the sheathed knife, prior to deposition. The sword itself is a complex object whose production required significant metalworking skills. Pattern welding creates a display of light and dark banding that is made by the combination of iron rods of high and low carbon content twisted together to create a single forged rod. The eventual grinding and polishing of the blade reveals patterning in alternate light and dark greys. The sword consists of two layers, each comprised of four or five twisted rods, framed by the edges (Fig 9).<sup>10</sup> On the basis of comparison with swords from other well-dated burials, production in the late 6th to 7th century seems most likely.<sup>11</sup> In cemeteries producing numerous pattern-welded swords, those made from four or more twisted rods are rare and are considered to be of higher quality.<sup>12</sup>

The blade was incomplete on discovery and folded. This folded form would have required the iron to have been reheated in order to bend it without snapping. Also, while precious metal hilt-fittings might be expected in association with such a prestigious object,

<sup>10</sup> Lang and Ager 1989, 91–2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Gilmour 2010.

it is notable that no precious metal was found directly related to the sword (although an unidentified and incomplete silver object (NCL-23B7E4) was found just downhill from Location 3). The weapon was therefore changed in several ways before burial. The act of heating and bending the blade might be regarded as evidence for the ritual killing of the object. It is also suggested that the recycling or redistribution of sword fittings may have been part of the exercise of elite power,<sup>13</sup> an interpretation underlined by the wear patterns on fittings and the large number of gold sword fittings found in the Staffordshire Hoard.<sup>14</sup> The removal of such fittings from the Eslington sword thus may also have been part of an act of ritual killing. Regardless of the absence of fittings, the skilled ironwork of the blade indicates a high-status weapon.

### A CEMETERY AT ESLINGTON

While casually lost or ‘stray’ brooches are sometimes discovered, it seems unlikely that the assemblage from Eslington can be attributed to repeated casual loss. The most likely interpretation is that these objects at three discrete locations were associated with mortuary activity, particularly given the cluster of objects from Location 3. While it is most likely that the ‘empty’ cist grave encountered in the 1890s was of prehistoric origin, it is at least possible that it and the graves indicated on the 1926 OS map represented the vestiges of early medieval burials.

A modest campaign of fieldwork was conducted in Reindeer Close to assess the potential for surviving archaeological features related to the artefacts recovered by metal detection. Resistivity survey carried out over four 30 m by 30 m grids, centred on the findspot of the folded sword and associated objects, proved inconclusive: the results appeared to indicate changes in underlying geology, and no likely archaeological features were identified. A brief excavation was undertaken between 17th and 21st June 2013 to determine the level of archaeological survival and examine the context of the objects. Priority was given to the area where the sword, shield mount, and other items listed under Location 3 were found.<sup>15</sup>

Two trenches were opened. No features dating to the early medieval period were identified in either, with the ploughsoil sitting directly on the bedrock in most places. Trench 2, however, revealed the location of two undisturbed cist burials inserted into the bedrock. The full excavation of one of these confirmed a Bronze-Age origin on the basis of a ceramic vessel found in the burial dating to c 2150–1700 BC.<sup>16</sup> The excavation of Trench 2 also confirmed that the large ‘earthen mound’ was a geological feature and not a damaged prehistoric mound. No other certain pre-modern artefacts were found, with the exception of a fragmented shale bangle, roughly formed and found in two pieces in buried ploughsoil. This type of bangle has a broad history of use in northern Britain from the Bronze Age to the medieval era; it may derive from the early medieval assemblage.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Fischer et al 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Brunning 2017; Fern 2017.

<sup>15</sup> The location of the findspots was confirmed with the finder of the objects, and a handheld GPS was used to provide an accurate recording of each early medieval object from Location 3. No meaningful pattern can be determined from discrete findspots for the objects, other than being dispersed through mechanical agriculture across an irregular area approximately 15–20 m in diameter.

<sup>16</sup> Gibson 1978.

<sup>17</sup> Hunter 2014. The plain and rough surface of the bangle in conjunction with the known Bronze-Age burial activity on the site would suggest a prehistoric date for the object. However, a Romano-British object (NCL-74DE87) was found approximately 1 km to the north of the site and Roman settlement activity in the vicinity may provide the context for such an object, as seen in lowland Scotland.



It seems likely that the whole ridge was used as a cemetery during the early medieval period, though without more contextual information this is not certain. The square-headed brooches from Location 1 and 2 each suggest single female burials. While each brooch is likely to have been just one object in a larger funerary assemblage, no other finds were recovered through metal detection at either location and there was no prospect of investigating the findspots through excavation. While typological traits indicate that the brooches were produced in the 6th century, their preservation hints at different funerary rituals. The good condition of the brooch from Location 1 suggests an inhumation, while the damaged and vitrified copper-alloy example from Location 2 may be evidence for cremation. It is also striking that at least one object from each of the three locations has evidence for the use of glass insets.

#### A HIGH-STATUS MALE BURIAL AT LOCATION 3

Location 3 produced the most objects. It is not certain that they all derived from the burial of one individual, but the group seems more likely to be a single dispersed or disturbed assemblage than the remains of an unknown number of mixed assemblages. Accepting the probability that all the items belonged to one inhumation, this can be interpreted as the remains of a very high-status male burial of the mid-/late 6th/early 7th century, including multiple weapons (sword, large knife, three spears, a belt knife), a shield bearing at least two mounts, possible harness fittings, and other objects contained within the iron agglomerations. The absence of any osteological material prevents certain sexing of the individual, but a biological male is most likely considering other instances of multiple weapon burials found in association with biologically-sexed skeletons. In this respect, the assemblage from Location 3 provides the most likely well-furnished example of a probable elite 'early Anglo-Saxon' man in the territory of Bernicia. This combination of multiple weapons, which occurs in less than 10% of weapon-furnished burials, is thought to represent the top echelons of a male warrior-aristocracy in early Anglo-Saxon society.<sup>18</sup>

A multiple weapon burial alone is enough to signal the status of the deceased, but there are a number of unique features in the assemblage that underscore the status of the individual. The shield bears more decoration than typically encountered, with at least two mounts including a zoomorphic one. The use of zoomorphic mounts on shields can be dated to the mid-6th to early 7th century and examples occur mostly in eastern England in the graves of elite men.<sup>19</sup> This mount is a far northern outlier and the only example known from Northumbria. The use of glass insets in a linear arrangement is a notable unique feature, and there is a strong probability that the surface was treated with silver or gold. This would place the mount in the Bichrome Style, which also suggests a 6th-century date, increasing the likelihood that the single, circular stud was also finished in Bichrome Style.

The detailed entry for the zoomorphic mount in Appendix 1 makes a case for the amalgamation of two creatures, a fish and a predatory creature such as a bird or dragon. Such an amalgamation is without direct parallel in England, but the combination of predatory bird and fish can be found in other metalwork. Examples include a harness mount from Gunthorpe, Norfolk (NMS-7B86F1); the enlarged detail from a bracteate from Zagórzyn, Poland; the separate fish mount and bird mount adjacent to each other on the shield from inhumation 21 at Tranmer House, Bromeswell, Suffolk; and the gold mount from the

<sup>18</sup> Härke 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Dickinson 2005, 110.

Staffordshire Hoard.<sup>20</sup> The overall shape might have been similar to the dragon mount from Sutton Hoo Mound 1, Suffolk.<sup>21</sup> The glass insets were probably intended to evoke the flashing scales of the fish; whatever the character of the other creature, the identification of a paw/talon seems a more convincing interpretation than the decorated edges of a recurving fish tail. A tentative reading of the mount would see the fish held in the claws or talons of an aggressive, predatory creature. The message would be consistent with the symbolic reading of other zoomorphic shield mounts which may have been intended to provide apotropaic defensive magic for the shield bearer.<sup>22</sup> The composite zoomorphology, possible Bichrome Style, and the use of glass insets all contribute to make this particular shield mount an exceptional object that would have signalled the high status of its owner.

The sword offers another unique feature of the burial. As noted above, the rarity of double-layered pattern-welded swords made of four or five rods underlines the status of the deceased, while its potential ritual killing adds to the exceptional nature of the finds.<sup>23</sup> Accepting that some swords in early medieval northern Europe were named, pseudo-anthropomorphised, and may have acted as vectors for valuable stories, the removal of a sword from circulation was likely a calculated act.<sup>24</sup> Possible motivations can be distinguished: provision for the afterlife; disposal of inalienable property; demonstrating conspicuous consumption or disposal in the burial community; as a gift to the deceased or the god(s); to indicate the rank or status of the person buried; or as a metaphor for components of the deceased's life. Most probable, however, is a combination of some or all of these.

The position of the burial in an 'earthen mound' on the field also hints at the high status of the dead person. The findspots of the objects were not central to the mound, and it is uncertain how displaced they had become as a result of more recent agriculture, but whether central or more peripheral, the assemblage, probably accompanying a male burial, was certainly inserted into a barrow-like feature. Early medieval barrow burials are a rarity in the early medieval kingdom of Northumbria beyond the historic borders of Yorkshire. Antiquarian finds from Capheaton, Northumberland and East Boldon, Co Durham, hint at similar sites,<sup>25</sup> but the only barrow burial that also contained evidence for weaponry and provides a good regional comparison was discovered in the 19th century at Barrasford in the valley of the North Tyne, where a shield boss with six silver studs, a sword and knife was inserted into a Bronze-Age cairn.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the use of natural knolls instead of barrows and man-made mounds is attested in other instances, notably in Lothian in Scotland where 7th-century burials have been associated with Northumbrian expansion.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Gunthorpe mount: NMS-7B86F1; Staffordshire Hoard mount: Birmingham Museum and Gallery accession no 2010.0138K0652 at <[www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems/fish-and-eagles-zoomorphic-mount](http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems/fish-and-eagles-zoomorphic-mount)> [accessed 22 Aug 2017]; Tranmer House inhumation 21: Fern 2015, 53–4, 78–80; for other examples see Fern 2015, 113–16, fig 4.6.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce-Mitford 1978, 55–67.

<sup>22</sup> See Dickinson 2005 for further discussion.

<sup>23</sup> Folding or ritual killing of swords is not necessarily uncommon, though its frequency has not been studied in depth. Accounts of the discovery of folded swords by antiquaries and early archaeologists did not always record such evidence, and these finds could result in a straightening of the sword. The complete folding of the Eslington sword, therefore, is difficult to assess in terms of its rarity. Its survival from deposition up to discovery is probably due to the matrix of mixed corrosion and mineralisation that has acted as a supporting architecture for the iron of the blade.

<sup>24</sup> Brunning 2017; Härke 2000; 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Cramp and Miket 1982.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce and Way 1880, 67, pl 22; Meaney 1964, 198.

<sup>27</sup> Orsini 2017, 85–8 has indicated that the use of knolls for burial was distinct and mutually exclusive from the reuse of prehistoric burial mounds and cairns. In this regard Eslington is an exception to this pattern, though its location and presumed role of the burial location is consistent with the practice in Lothian.

Other objects such as drinking or feasting vessels in metal, glass, or ceramic might reasonably be expected in such a high-status burial. The lack of such objects may be an original feature of the burial, and this possibility cannot be discounted. Given the extent of damage to the site it is fortunate that any material has survived at all, and it is impossible to determine what objects may have been lost. Nevertheless, the Eslington burial is at present the 'richest' male grave of the early Anglo-Saxon period known in the modern county of Northumberland.

## THE LANDSCAPE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ESLINGTON SITE

At the local scale the Eslington site is notable for at least two episodes of burial activity. The discovery of two cists of early Bronze-Age date confirms that the site was once a focus for prehistoric burial. Its location is typical of such burials in this part of Northumberland: comparable sites in the vicinity include burials discovered near Mountain Farm, 1.6 km to the east,<sup>28</sup> and a cairn at Ferny Knowe, 1 km to the north.<sup>29</sup> Early Bronze-Age burials in the region were sometimes inserted into existing mounds of either natural or earlier prehistoric origin.<sup>30</sup> Examples include Cheviot Walk Wood, with burials in a natural mound,<sup>31</sup> and others inserted into the Neolithic barrow at Copt Hill near Houghton-le-Spring.<sup>32</sup> The latter provides a valuable comparison to Eslington since a burial of possible early medieval date was later set in a cist dug into this mound. Whether they realised the mound-like rise at Eslington was a natural feature or not, the Bronze-Age community clearly regarded it as an appropriate location for burial.

Early medieval people may have had a similar view of the place nearly 2,500 years later when the site was once again the focus for burial. The 6th and 7th centuries were a time of experimentation in mortuary strategies, when new types of burial were used to create new types of relationships between men and women and the territories they inhabited. The reuse of prehistoric burial sites including mounds was common: Sarah Semple has noted that it varied in frequency from around 60% of known early medieval barrow burials in Sussex to as many as 80% in Wiltshire.<sup>33</sup> In Yorkshire, Anglo-Saxon burials were sited on and around prehistoric monuments at places including Sancton, Uncleby and West Heslerton.<sup>34</sup> In the north-eastern counties of Durham and Northumberland the most famous case is Yeavering, where extensive early medieval cemeteries were excavated in association with prehistoric ring-ditches.<sup>35</sup> The reuse of ancient sites at places like Yeavering or the nearby henges at Milfield<sup>36</sup> is widely regarded as a strategy which enabled emerging political dynasties to affirm their authority over territories and communities,<sup>37</sup> but relatively few examples have been discovered to date in the portion of the kingdom of Northumbria that lies north of the Tees, the likely territory of the earlier kingdom of Bernicia. By associating themselves and their high-status dead with pre-existing communities and prominent local topographic

<sup>28</sup> Dodds 1935, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Northumberland Historic Environment Record N3203.

<sup>30</sup> Fowler 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Stopford et al 1985.

<sup>32</sup> Young 1985.

<sup>33</sup> Semple 2013, 16–44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 26–38.

<sup>35</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Scull and Harding 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Bradley 1987.

features, new dynasties may have been able to justify their claims over the contemporary landscape and reinforce them by forging connections to its past.

A key characteristic of the so-called ‘conspicuous’ burials of the late 6th and early 7th centuries was the growing tendency for primary and secondary barrow burials to be isolated from ordinary cemeteries. In the later 7th century it was largely women who were buried in this way, sometimes in prehistoric barrows,<sup>38</sup> though innovation continued to produce highly unusual practices like the double rectangle of burials enclosing a central inhumation of very high status at Street House on the north-eastern limit of the North York Moors.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, in the late 6th and early 7th centuries it was usually men who were interred in mounds, often on the fringes of existing cemeteries or in isolated positions. Such burials have been interpreted as the result of increasing social differentiation, where emerging elites used burial practices to help confirm the distinctiveness of their identity compared to society more generally.<sup>40</sup> Many burials of this type date to a time before the regions in which they are located began conversion to Christianity. Rather than a reaction to religious change, it seems more likely these burials were part of social, institutional and political transformations which began in the 6th century and accelerated during the conversion period. Elite families used ‘technologies’ associated with Christianity, such as institutionalised landownership and changing perceptions of the body and death, to underpin their growing authority, but significant changes had already begun in the 6th century.<sup>41</sup> The richly furnished burial at Eslington is one of very few known examples of this type in Bernicia, but it suggests similar strategies were in use by the emerging elites of northern Northumbria to those identified elsewhere in eastern England.<sup>42</sup>

The material from Eslington invites consideration of the possibility that the late 6th century marked a significant cultural shift in northern Northumbria. In much of eastern England, the appearance of ‘conspicuous burials’ was preceded by furnished inhumation or cremation in the 5th and 6th centuries. Few burials of this type have been identified in north-eastern England, where practices appear to have had more in common with those of the late-Roman frontier.<sup>43</sup> Eslington may represent the new traditions of a social elite, seeking to break away from previous cultural and political alignments by implementing strategies similar to those used by contemporaries elsewhere in England. As in Sussex, Wessex, or Deira, innovative burial practices may have been used in Bernicia to underpin the authority of new elites and the territorial building-blocks of the emerging kingdom. The evidence from Eslington is consistent with Bede’s narrative in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of an increasingly stratified and militarised *English* aristocratic culture only emerging under Æthelfrith in the late-6th or very early 7th century.<sup>44</sup>

The site at Eslington is situated in a landscape that is full of visible archaeological remains. The burials lie on a ridge above the valley of the River Aln, which flows eastward just over 1 km to the south. A Roman road runs along the southern side of the valley and is visible from the site. This connected Dere Street in the west with the early Roman fort of Learchild (around 3 km east of the village of Whittingham). On the higher slopes both

<sup>38</sup> Hamerow 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Sherlock 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Shephard 1979; Semple 2013, 48–51.

<sup>41</sup> Turner and Fowler 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Blair 2005, 52–3; Williams 2006, 27–33; Moreland 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Collins 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.34, in Colgrave and Mynors 1969.



north and south of the river there are a number of well-preserved small hillforts (or enclosed settlements) originally constructed in the Bronze or Iron Age, but which may also have been occupied in later periods. In the Late Middle Ages there was relatively intensive exploitation on the hillsides here, indicated by the extensive ridge-and-furrow surviving in permanent pasture beyond the arable fields which are cultivated today and by the remains of several small settlements, including the one in Plantation Field. The extent of arable land in the Early Middle Ages is unknown, but it is likely that the best fields lay on the relatively sheltered and fertile lower valley sides below the burial site. In a recent article, Colm O'Brien and Max Adams have argued that the landscape of Whittingham may have been developed for its pastoral resources from the 8th century by Lindisfarne, following donation of the estates at Whittingham, Edlingham and Eglingham to the monastery by King Ceolwulf in AD 737.<sup>45</sup> Discovery of the burial site, and particularly the high-status assemblage, suggests the Aln valley was also exploited earlier, from at least the mid-6th century.

As Shephard argued in the late 1970s, isolated barrow burials could have developed as a way to mark the territories associated with different groups.<sup>46</sup> This theme has been pursued by other researchers who have mainly considered sites in southern and central England. 'Conspicuous' burials were commonly located in places visible either from the farmland that lay in the valleys below their ridge- or hill-top sites,<sup>47</sup> or from route ways that passed close by them.<sup>48</sup> Anglo-Saxon charters from Wessex show that richly furnished isolated burials were sometimes located near estate boundaries recorded in the 10th or 11th centuries (eg Swallowcliffe Down, Wiltshire;<sup>49</sup> West Hanney, Oxfordshire<sup>50</sup>). Such boundaries were frequently perpetuated in the parishes and hundreds of the Late Middle Ages, and it is possible that these in turn occasionally preserve the boundaries of earlier territorial units.<sup>51</sup>

The early medieval territorial structure of northern Northumbria is not fully understood and research in other regions has shown it can be risky to assume that parish boundaries remained stable over very long periods.<sup>52</sup> Northumberland has no extant early medieval charters and is omitted from Domesday Book, so it is hard to be certain about the exact boundaries of territorial units. Even so, the early Northumbrian 'shires' which are dimly visible in the documentary sources<sup>53</sup> appear to have been the forerunners of later medieval 'wards' (analogous to the hundreds of southern England).<sup>54</sup> We know from narrative sources written between the 8th and 11th centuries that many grants of land were made to monasteries in the region which were able to build control over very large territories.<sup>55</sup> King Ceolwulf's grant of Whittingham itself in the 730s suggests the estate could have been a royal one from an early date.<sup>56</sup> If so, it would be typical of the valley-based units known along the rivers Tyne and Wear and elsewhere in England.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>45</sup> O'Brien and Adams 2016, 23. *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, 11 (Johnson South 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Shephard 1979, 77.

<sup>47</sup> Williams 1999; Hamerow et al 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Semple 2003; Moreland 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Speake 1989.

<sup>50</sup> Hamerow et al 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Turner 2006, 107–12; Hamerow et al 2015, 103.

<sup>52</sup> Zadora-Rio 2016.

<sup>53</sup> O'Brien 2002.

<sup>54</sup> Youngs 1991, 718.

<sup>55</sup> Rollason 2003, 182–3.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson South 2002, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Roberts 2010; Turner et al 2013; Blair 1994.

The church at Whittingham, 3.3 km east of the site at Eslington, incorporates several phases of pre-Norman stonework, including parts of an arcaded nave and a western chamber with the side-alternate quoins that are typical of many early Northumbrian churches associated with likely royal or monastic centres such as Corbridge, Wearmouth and Jarrow.<sup>58</sup> Although its exact date remains uncertain, the church at Whittingham corroborates the existence of an important centre on the upper Aln in the mid- and late-Saxon periods which would certainly have been associated with an extensive territory, including much, or all, of the later medieval parish.

The proposed burial ground at Eslington lies close to the western boundary of the early-modern ecclesiastical parish of Whittingham, and less than 1 km from the place where Alnham, Ingram and Whittingham parishes meet below Raven's Crag on the Mere Burn. Although the burial is not perched on the highest hill in the valley, it does stand on the watershed that separates the catchments of the River Aln and the River Breamish to the north. It seems likely that the cemetery, and especially the sword burial in its prominent mound, would have marked a significant point in an important 6th-century territory that formed part of the developing kingdom of Bernicia.

## CONCLUSIONS

The discovery of early Anglo-Saxon metalwork through metal-detecting at Eslington must be interpreted in the context of the identification of increasing numbers of early medieval sites in Northumberland.<sup>59</sup> However, the recovery of a pattern-welded sword that appears to have been part of a larger mortuary assemblage including a shield, a large knife, and spears sets the site at Eslington apart from other recent discoveries. These finds provide evidence of a high-status male inhumation located in a position that was both highly visible and perhaps related to emerging early medieval territorial units in the Aln valley. Finds from two other locations suggest two further graves, one an inhumation of a woman indicated by the gilded head of a great square-headed brooch, and the other a possible cremation of a woman suggested by the highly damaged bow of a second square-headed brooch. All three putative graves can be dated to the 6th century, though the individual buried with the sword was probably buried late in that century.

The Eslington sword burial can be compared to multiple weapon burials in southern and eastern parts of England, but the practice is otherwise unattested in the region of Bernicia. The assemblage from the site can be interpreted as evidence for a period of cultural change in the late 6th century: a time when Northumbria began to emerge as a powerful kingdom, and an associated elite began to experiment with funerary rites comparable to those used by their Anglo-Saxon counterparts further south.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The identification of this important site would have been impossible without the conscientious searching and recording methods of the finder, who wishes to remain anonymous, and the cooperation and granting of access to the fields in question by Lord Ravensworth. Useful discussion on some of the artefacts discovered was also provided by Dr Tania Dickinson (University of York), Dr Leslie Webster (British Museum), Dr Jennifer Jones (Durham University), Dr Chloe Duckworth (Newcastle University) and Dr Chris Fowler (Newcastle University).

<sup>58</sup> Cramp 2005; Turner et al 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Collins 2010.

## APPENDIX 1

This appendix provides a handlist of objects found in the local study area, ordered initially by the field in which the object was found and using the reference that the object is recorded under on the PAS database. Full descriptions of the early medieval objects are provided here for the convenience of the reader. Objects of other dates are simply noted.

## PLANTATION FIELD

NCL-7298A8 Brooch (square-headed), early medieval, c AD 500–570 — Location 1

Only the head of the brooch survives, but the morphology and decoration confirms the identification as a square-headed brooch (Fig 2a). It was cast in copper alloy and retains traces of gilding as well as a circular glass inset. The relief decoration of the head survives in sufficient detail to assign the brooch to Hines' Group 15,<sup>60</sup> particularly in the use of a glass inlay flanked by four-scroll swastikas in the inner panel immediately above the bow. This is a variation of the example from Lakenheath.<sup>61</sup> The L-shapes of the second panel framing the inner panel contain loose, incoherent Style 1 beasts in profile, though the panels are not mirror images of each other. Indeed, the second panels and outer frame fit more comfortably in Hines' Group 14.<sup>62</sup> As only the head of the brooch has survived, other decorative elements cannot be used to more definitively place the brooch in a group. Group 14 is a second-phase group, only known in Yorkshire, while Group 15 is one of Hines' late-phase groups, with a concentration in the Fens of England. The decoration of this particular brooch suggests it may be a distant cousin of both groups rather than part of the main genealogy. Such a mix of features is typical of square-headed brooches from northern England, though the fact that they draw upon the (late) Phase 3 elements suggests a later date of production and use. Dating of the brooch on the basis of typo-chronological factors places it in the mid-/late 6th century.

NCL-987723 Buckle, medieval–post-medieval, c AD 1200–1700

NCL-A69A06 Coin, post-medieval, sixpence of Elizabeth I, AD 1558–1599

NCL-756194 Coin, post-medieval (Scottish), two pence of William II, AD 1695–1697

## REINDEER CLOSE

NCL-B35398 Brooch (square-headed), early medieval, c AD 500–600 — Location 2

The second square-headed brooch consists only of a damaged copper-alloy fragment identifiable as the bow (Fig 2b). The bow has a central ridge with a circular setting for a glass inset, now missing. Panels to either side of the central ridge appear to bear Style 1 decoration, but the level of fragmentation and damage makes further identification uncertain. On the basis of its surviving decorative elements, it would fit comfortably within Hines' Groups 9 or 10, later in Phase 2, thought to date to the early/mid-6th century.<sup>63</sup> The metal of the brooch is rough and slightly porous in texture, appearing vitrified. The degree of damage to the metal may indicate some loss of lead content due to a fire.<sup>64</sup> The presence of a fire-damaged fragment, in turn, suggests the brooch's inclusion in a cremation burial, though this cannot be proven without a confirmed archaeological context.

NCL-7F19D3 Knife (or seax), early medieval, c AD 450–600 — Location 3

An incomplete, corroded fragment of a large knife of narrow seax, with only the base of the blade and upper tang surviving (Fig 4). In section, the blade is triangular, and the tang projects along the back, flat edge of the blade. The tang is approximately 17–18 mm in width, with corrosion obscuring the width of the blade, which varied between 30–40 mm. The fragmentary nature of the object means that its overall length cannot be ascertained. Seen within the regional context of northern England, a large knife is more probable, though this does not eliminate the possibility of the fragment being that

<sup>60</sup> Hines 1997, 111–18.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pl 46b.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pl 45.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 80–93.

<sup>64</sup> C Duckworth pers comm.

of a seax. Numerous typologies of continental material date blades of this width to the late 5th to early 7th centuries, with the majority falling into the mid-/late 6th century.<sup>65</sup>

**NCL-7F11C1** Shield boss, early medieval, c AD 450–600 — Location 3

Only the apex of the iron boss remains, consisting of a cylindrical, flat-topped stud integral to the mildly convex peak of the cone (Fig 3a). The entire fragment has suffered from corrosion, obscuring further detail. The small amount of surviving boss makes attribution to a typological group impossible, but the relatively flat peak of the cone favours attribution in one of the later Groups, such as 3, 6 or 8, putting the boss in the 6th or even the 7th century.<sup>66</sup> Recent revision of shield boss forms through correspondence analysis has altered the chronology,<sup>67</sup> but not enough remains of this shield boss to reassess it using the key attributes identified.

**NCL-7F3784** Mount (shield grip?), early medieval, c AD 450–600 — Location 3

This oblong piece of iron is held within a larger conglomeration of iron corrosion (Fig 3b). The overall form of the conglomeration can be roughly described as hourglass-shaped in plan view. One end of the conglomeration may offer a section view of the original iron object, which appears to be C-shaped. While it is difficult to identify corroded iron, the hourglass shape in plan and potential C-shaped section may suggest a flanged style of shield grip,<sup>68</sup> though such an identification is a possibility at best.

**NCL-D97D06** Mount (shield stud), early medieval, c AD 500–600 — Location 3

A copper-alloy stud with a decorated discoidal head (D: 23.36 mm) and a subcircular shank (L: 7.42 mm) emerging from the centre of the reverse face (Fig 3c). A smaller shank (L: 1.43 mm), and the subcircular scar of another missing shank mirroring the former, can be found flanking the longer, central shank. The decorated face consists of a flat circular boss in the centre and a flat outer border flush with the centre; between the centre and the border is a ring at lower depth with relief decoration consisting of a thick inner and outer circle flanking short lengths of 'bars' in a dashed-circular arrangement. A white-grey substance in the field between the relief decoration contrasts with the blue-green colour of the elements in relief that may be the remains of a solder or base for some surface application, probably gilding or silvering. The surface corrosion and appearance of the centre and border is worse than the decorated ring and while the variance of height/depth is a factor in this, another factor is likely to be different surface metallurgy. This may suggest Bichrome decoration, which would date the stud to the 6th century.

While not bearing the same form of relief decoration, a reasonable comparison can be made with the small discoidal shield mounts from Tranmer House inhumation 21 (see above), where two groups of four mounts arranged linearly were excavated in situ with other shield elements.<sup>69</sup> Due to the nature of its discovery and preservation of the overall assemblage, it is impossible to state where on the shield this stud was located. Its size and decoration are compatible with use on the flange of the shield boss or elsewhere on the shield board.

**NCL-B405D4** Shield mount (zoomorphic), early medieval, c AD 500–600 — Location 3

The mount consists of four adjoining copper-alloy fragments that form a composite zoomorphic representation of a fish, possibly amalgamated with a larger predatory bird, dragon, or other creature, though this cannot be confirmed due to the missing 'head' of the larger creature (Fig 3d). In its current, incomplete state, it is not possible to determine if the mount is symmetric or asymmetric, but comparison of surviving undamaged edges of the mount suggests that an asymmetric arrangement is most likely. The mount has a tripartite structure in decoration, with the two surviving parts approximately equal in length.

The central panel that comprises the fish consists of an oval with flattened ends and a moulded, double-corded border. Emerging from one edge of the fish is a subtriangular fin; the opposite edge

<sup>65</sup> Høilund Nielsen 2013, 194–5.

<sup>66</sup> Dickinson and Härke 1992.

<sup>67</sup> Høilund Nielsen 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Dickinson and Härke 1992, 24–7.

<sup>69</sup> Fern 2015, 53–4, 78–80.



may also have sported a mirrored fin, but damage to the edge of the central panel makes this uncertain. The body of the fish bears a series of interchanging raised circular- and lozenge-shaped settings, the latter retaining cut-glass insets.

A large, cast-integral tapered terminal can be understood as the presumed 'head' of the fish, with this orientation confirmed by the survival of the fin, the tip of which points opposite the direction of the fish's head. Damage and corrosion prevent certain identification, but there are two decorated lappets or flanges that bridge the outer edges of the head-terminal to the fish body; these appear to have been decorated, as fragmentary lengths of borders and interlace are visible.

The opposite 'tail' end of the fish panel is largely missing, but a decorated arm survives to one side, turning back so that it nearly touches the surviving fin of the fish. The edge of the arm terminates with decorated features. There are two possibilities: the missing tail has an exaggerated spatulate shape with decorated edges; or the missing fragment is something different from a fish tail. The remaining portion of decoration can be interpreted as the toes or talons of a predatory foot. The innermost toe/talon is independent from the others, crescentic and turning in toward the other toes/talons, or could be a tailfin of the fish. The remaining three toes/talons are aligned adjacent to each other, two of which are undamaged/complete and retain a shallow, circular concavity that may have been inset with another material, now missing. The arrangement of the proposed toes/talons is best compared to that of predatory birds seen on other zoomorphic shield mounts, such as that from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo.

The identification of a toe/talon indicates that there was an amalgamation of the fish with another creature. On the basis of comparison, the curved talons or toes of a paw would favour the identification of the larger zoomorphic element being a predatory bird,<sup>70</sup> but the possibility that the head depicted a dragon or some other creature cannot be dismissed, particularly given the relative rarity of these latter forms.<sup>71</sup>

The underside is undecorated, but retains three cylindrical cast-integral shanks with hammered terminals. The circular shape locating where the rivets penetrated the body of the mount can be traced in the corrosion on the upper face near the tip of the undecorated terminal, close to the centre of the fish, and just outside the tail of the fish. The latter two are more closely spaced than the shank in the terminal, and a fourth shank is speculated to have been near the edge of the missing element of the mount.

Despite the damage suffered, the size and overall shape of the mount confirms its use as a shield mount that would have been located on the front boards of the shield. The use of zoomorphic mounts on shields can be dated to the mid-6th to early 7th century and are found mostly in eastern England in the graves of men of elite status.<sup>72</sup> Much of the decoration has been lost or obscured by corrosion, and this makes certain attribution to a type impossible. Furthermore, corrosion has severely damaged the surface, but there is a strong probability that the surface was treated with silver or possibly gold, as well as the surviving glass insets. This would place the mount in the Bichrome Style, further reinforcing a 6th-century date.

NCL-96F2A0 and NCL-96C605 x3 spear sockets and ring, iron agglomeration, early medieval, c AD 450–600 — Location 3

This iron agglomeration contains multiple objects (Fig 5). There is a set of at least three iron conical sockets, almost certainly spear-butt sockets. The sockets are not fully visible, and are most easily identified by the open, circular bases. One is more clearly visible than the others, though its full size cannot be determined. The maximum diameter of the base measures 11.92 mm, with the thickness measuring 1.82 mm; estimated maximum length is 64.38 mm.

Resting beside or above the sockets within the agglomeration is a large iron ring, partially visible where not covered by the iron agglomeration, though its full shape is revealed through X-ray examination. Maximum diameter is 63.85 mm with a maximum thickness of 12.78 mm. The X-ray also revealed an oblong, possibly tubular, object resting across and extending beyond the diameter of the ring. The shape of the object does not appear to correlate with the conical sockets, though the alignment and position are feasible, and may indicate that the sockets are not in fact the presumed conical shape.

<sup>70</sup> Dickinson 2005, 134, fig 12.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 136, fig 13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 110.

NCL-A6E027 Ring in iron agglomeration, early medieval, c AD 450–600 — Location 3

An iron ring partially visible within a larger iron agglomeration. Less than 50% of the ring is visible, but it is clearly circular or subcircular in section with a minimum diameter of 53 mm. X-ray has revealed the full extent of the ring, as well as a possible smaller second interlinked ring and some other linear object with a rounded head.

NCL-7F28C0 Iron agglomeration with a ring and other objects, early medieval, c AD 450–600 — Location 3

The agglomeration is irregularly shaped, with one surface revealing the outline of an iron drop-shaped mount (L: 31.90 mm) with a circular perforation in the centre of the rounded end, the agglomeration forming around the mount, now lost, to create a cast retained by the preserved outer surface. The pointed end appears to expand into the base of a circular loop. Seemingly interlinked with the loop of the mount are the remains of half an iron ring, seen as a C-shape in plan and section, with an outer diameter of 37.41 mm. The ring is likely interlinked with another ring that may or may not be connected to a further iron socketed fitting that is only partially visible in the agglomeration, though seemingly more complete. The fitting consists of a cylindrical base, with only the outer edge visible in profile, that appears to be part of a fitted socket. A narrow length of bone is also contained within the agglomeration, though consultation determined its small size and fragmentary condition means the species cannot be identified without scientific means. The agglomeration makes certain identification of the artefact impossible, but the rings and fittings are very suggestive of harness equipment, specifically for the bridle and bit.

NCL-7F4417 and NCL-7F3D46 Iron conglomerations, early medieval, c AD 450–600 — Location 3

These two conglomerations are irregular in shape. X-rays have been unable to reveal internal contents, but the weight of both hints that more than one object may be contained within the outer shell of iron corrosion.

NCL-7EF795 Sword and associated objects, early medieval, c AD 550–650 — Location 3

An incomplete, folded, pattern-welded sword forms the main component of a group of objects that in combination create a distinct assemblage (Fig 7). The iron of the sword has corroded, and this corrosion in conjunction with the corrosion of associated objects has made identification of some of these objects ambiguous. Therefore, it is useful to separate each element of the sword assemblage. The numbers provided with each object correspond to those in Figure 8 to facilitate the location of each object relative to the sword for the reader.

1. *Sword*: The sword consists of a 366 mm length of blade that has been folded in half, such that the blade creates a U-shape, with the two broken ends of the blade touching. The iron at the curvature of the fold is generally undamaged, but there is more corrosion and lamination of the iron of the blade away from the fold. There is no evidence for the tip or tang of the sword, or any other related hilt and handle fittings. X-ray and visual inspection reveals that the sword is pattern welded, though the folding of the sword makes it difficult to identify the width of individual rods. On first inspection of the X-ray the sword appears to consist of three wide rods, but a patch of displaced corrosion reveals two adjacent rods that would allow for the full width to consist of four or five rods flanked by the edges. The corrosion is such that the structure of the sword can be seen clearly, consisting of two layers each bearing four or five rods welded together with blade edges forged to the outside of the double-layered centre (Fig 9). The layers may or may not have been welded onto a core; it is not possible to ascertain visually, nor does X-ray reveal this. The sword can be placed in Lang and Ager's Type C, as four rods of continuous twist, forming a stack of 'W' or 'M' shapes, also described as herringbone, with examples that date from the 5th–10th centuries.<sup>73</sup> Lang and Ager catalogue five examples of Type C that are also double-layered, as the

<sup>73</sup> Lang and Ager 1989, 96.

Eslington sword is, four of which date to the 6th and 7th centuries and one to the 9th century. The corrosion on the blade, however, means that it is not possible to determine if the decorative display is a consistent stack of 'W' or 'M' shapes or if these were interspersed with lengths of another decorative scheme. The possibility of the presence of a fifth rod would also alter the identification based on this decorative arrangement. Corrosion has also limited observation of the outer edges to very short lengths. The maximum width of the blade is 47.71 mm and the maximum thickness (where least corroded) is 5.96 mm. Viewed in profile, it is clear that other objects were inserted in the hollow of the fold, and other objects are corroded to the sword on its outer faces. An iron knife (2) and surviving copper-alloy chape (3) are found in the hollow of the fold, with a possible iron blade or tool (6) inserted further up between the extremes of the folded blade. An oblong fitting (5) is fused to the side of one portion of the blade, and a socketed fitting (4) is placed centrally on one broad face of the blade. Possible mounts (7) are found near one end of the folded sword blade. In addition, there are visible fragments of bone material, and the conservator has commented that some of the corrosion biproduct appears to comprise mineralised bone material<sup>74</sup> (shaded grey in the drawing to further distinguish from denser iron corrosion). The other attached objects are tentatively identified as part of a sword belt, with the position of the knife (2), and a surviving chape from a leather or textile sheath (3), as well as the possible mounts (7), together indicating that the sword belt may have been wrapped around the folded sword.

2. *Knife*: An iron knife blade 57.78 mm in length, 14.64 mm in width, and 3.42 mm in maximum thickness. A full view of the knife is impossible, positioned as it is in the fold of the sword, but it appears to be a roughly triangular-shaped blade, with a triangular section. It was probably placed while still in its sheath, as a copper-alloy chape (3) is found over the pointed end of the knife, the tip of which extends through the chape.
3. *Knife sheath chape*: The chape is made of a sheet of folded copper alloy, with the outer face of the chape appearing to have a convex or domed appearance. The chape is 19.82 mm in width and 6 mm in thickness, measured from each outer face.
4. *Socketed fitting*: A sub-rectangular hollow or socketed fitting is found fused to the blade. It is incomplete, but what remains is 52.84 mm in length, 22.45 mm in width, and 8 mm in thickness. It is unclear if it is made of iron or copper alloy. When complete, the object would have been oval in section.
5. *Oblong fitting*: An oblong iron fitting rests against the outer edge of one portion of the sword blade. The fitting is relatively amorphous, but distinct enough in its shape and position to be a different object. It is 66.43 mm in length and 12.23 mm in width.
6. *Possible blade or tool*: A possible iron blade or tool is visible in profile between the 'arms' of the folded sword, providing an oblique section view of the object. The object is approximately 10 mm in width and 4.84 mm in thickness, with a narrow triangular section.
7. *Mount fitting*: A possible copper-alloy, or iron, pair of small domed mounts resting against the edge of the blade, dome facing down to either side. The objects are approximately 16 mm in maximum dome width and 7 mm in maximum dome height for one, and 13 mm and 7 mm in maximum dome height for the other.

NCL-72A106 Coin, post-medieval, threepence of Elizabeth I, AD 1574

NCL-23B7E4 Unidentified object (silver), uncertain date

ORCID

Turner Sam  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3257-0070>

<sup>74</sup> Jennifer Jones pers comm.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, trans B Colgrave and R A B Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1969.
- Blair, J 1994, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, Stroud: Tempus.
- Blair, J 2005, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bradley, R 1987, 'Time regained: the creation of continuity', *J Brit Archaeol Assoc* **140**, 1–17.
- Bruce, J C and Way, A 1880, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Antiquities, chiefly British, at Alnwick Castle*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Andrew Reid.
- Bruce-Miford, R 1978, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, Vol 2: *Arms, Armour and Regalia*, London: British Museum.
- Brunning, S 2017, 'Crossing edges? 'Person-like' swords in Anglo-Saxon England', in Semple, Orsini and Mui, 409–17.
- Collins, R 2010, 'Recent discoveries of early Anglian material culture in the North East', *Medieval Archaeol* **54**, 386–90.
- Collins, R 2017, 'The frontier foundations of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria', in Semple, Orsini and Mui, 45–54.
- Collins, R and Allason-Jones, L (eds) 2010,  *Finds from the Frontier: Material Culture in the 4th and 5th Centuries*, York: Council for British Archaeology.
- Cramp, R 2005, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites*, Vol 1, London: English Heritage.
- Cramp, R and Milet, R 1982, *Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon and Viking Antiquities in the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle upon Tyne*, Newcastle: Museum of Antiquities.
- Dickinson, T 2005, 'Symbols of protection: the significance of animal-ornamented shields in early Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Archaeol* **49**, 109–63.
- Dickinson, T and Härke, H 1992, *Early Anglo-Saxon Shields*, London: Society of Antiquaries of London.
- Dixon, D D 1899, *Whittingham Vale, Northumberland: its History, Traditions and Folk Lore*, Newcastle: Robert Redpath.
- Dodds, M 1935, *A History of Northumberland. Volume 14, the Parishes of Alnham, Chatton, Chillingham, Eglingham, Ilderton, Ingram and Whittingham – the Chapelries of Lowick and Doddington*, Newcastle: Andrew Reid.
- Fern, C J R 2015, *Before Sutton Hoo: The Prehistoric Remains and Early Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Tranmer House, Bromeswell, Suffolk*, East Anglian Archaeol **155**.
- Fern, C J R 2017, 'Treasure at the frontier: key artefacts from the Staffordshire Hoard', in Semple, Orsini and Mui, 419–39.
- Fischer, S, Soulat, J and Linton Fischer, T 2013, 'Sword parts and their depositional contexts — Symbols in Migration and Merovingian period martial society', *Fornvännen* **108**, 109–22.
- Fowler, C 2013, *The Emergent Past: A Relational Realist Archaeology of Early Bronze Age Mortuary Practices*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gibson, A 1978, *Bronze Age Pottery in the North-East of England*, Brit Archaeol Rep Brit Ser **56**.
- Gilmour, B 2010, 'Ethnic identity and the origins, purpose and occurrence of pattern-welded swords in sixth-century Kent: the case of the Saltwood cemetery', in M Henig and N Ramsay (eds), *Intersections: The Archaeology and History of Christianity in England, 400–1200*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 59–70.
- Hamerow, H 2016, 'Furnished female burial in seventh-century England: gender and sacral authority in the Conversion Period', *Early Medieval Europe* **24**(4), 423–47.
- Hamerow, H, Byard, A, Cameron, E et al 2015, 'A high-status seventh-century female burial from West Hanney, Oxfordshire', *Antiq J* **95**, 91–118.
- Härke, H 1989, 'Early Saxon weapon burials: frequencies, distributions and weapon combinations', in S C Hawkes (ed), *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 49–61.
- Härke, H 2000, 'The circulation of weapons in Anglo-Saxon society', in F Theuvs and J L Nelson (eds), *Rituals of Power from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, Transformation of the Roman World **8**, 377–99.
- Härke, H 2014, 'Grave goods in early medieval burials: messages and meanings', *Mortality* **19**(1), 1–21.
- Hines, J 1997, *A New Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Great Square-Headed Brooches*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
- Høilund Nielsen, K H 2013, 'Typology', in A Bayliss and J Hines (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework*, Soc Medieval Archaeol Monogr **33**, 133–229.
- Hope-Taylor, B 1977, *Yewering: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria*, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- Hunter, F 2014, 'Stories from black bangles: jewellery and other finds of jet-like materials in Roman Scotland', in R Collins and F McIntosh (eds), *Life in the Limes: Studies of the People and Objects of the Roman Frontiers Presented to Lindsay Allason-Jones*, Oxford: Oxbow, 152–165.
- Johnson South, T (ed) 2002, *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto: a History of Saint Cuthbert and a Record*



- of his Patrimony, Anglo-Saxon Texts No 3, Cambridge: D S Brewer.
- Lang, J and Ager, B 1989, 'Swords of the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods in the British Museum: a radiographic study', in S C Hawkes (ed), *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 85–122.
- Meaney, A 1964, *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Moreland, J 2016, 'Converting the Peak District? Britons, Angles and Christians', in Ó Carragáin and Turner, 277–300.
- Ó Carragáin, T and Turner, S (eds) 2016, *Making Christian Landscapes in Atlantic Europe. Conversion and Consolidation in the Early Middle Ages*, Cork: Cork University Press.
- O'Brien, C and Adams, M 2016, 'The identification of early medieval monastic estates in Northumbria', *Medieval Sett Res* **31**, 15–27.
- Orsini, C 2017, 'Negotiating identity in north-east England and south-east Scotland', in Semple, Orsini and Mui, 83–90.
- Roberts, B 2010, 'Northumbrian origins and post-Roman continuity: an exploration', in Collins and Allason-Jones, 120–132.
- Rollason, D 2003, *Northumbria 500–1100. Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scull, C and Harding, A 1990, 'Two early medieval cemeteries at Milfield, Northumberland', *Durham Archaeol J* **6**, 1–29.
- Semple, S 2003, 'Burials and political boundaries in the Avebury region, north Wiltshire', *Anglo-Saxon Stud Archaeol Hist* **12**, 72–91.
- Semple, S 2013, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Semple, S, Orsini, C and Mui, S (eds) 2017, *Life on the Edge: Social, Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe*. Neue Studien zur Sachsenforschung 6, Braunschweigisches.
- Sherlock, S 2012, *A Royal Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Street House, Loftus, North-East Yorkshire*, Tees Archaeol Monogr **6**.
- Shephard, J 1979, 'The social identity of the individual in isolated barrows and barrow cemeteries in Anglo-Saxon England', in B Burnham and J Kingsbury (eds), *Space, Hierarchy and Society*, Brit Archaeol Rep Internat Ser **59**, 47–79.
- Speake, G 1989, *A Saxon Bed Burial on Swallowcliffe Down: Excavations by F de M Vatcher*, London: English Heritage.
- Stopford, J, Weyman, J and Ford, W et al 1985, 'Two cemeteries of the second millennium B.C. in Northumbria', *Archaeol Aeliana*, 5th ser **13**, 117–31.
- Turner, S 2006, *Making a Christian Landscape. The Countryside in Early Medieval Cornwall, Devon and Wessex*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Turner, S and Fowler, C 2016, 'The bones of the Northumbrian landscape: technologies of social change in the conversion period' in Ó Carragáin and Turner, 249–63.
- Turner, S, Semple, S and Turner, A 2013, *Wearmouth and Jarrow. Northumbrian monasteries in an historic landscape*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.
- Williams, H 1999, 'Placing the dead: investigating the location of wealthy barrow burials in seventh century England', in M Rundkvist (ed), *Grave Matters*, Brit Archaeol Rep Internat Ser **781**, 57–86.
- Williams, H 2006, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Young, R 1985, 'The Copt Hill, Houghton-le-Spring, round cairn: a reassessment', *Archaeol Aeliana* 5th ser **13**, 7–17.
- Youngs, F 1991, *Local Administrative Units: Northern England*, London: Royal Historical Society.
- Zadora-Rio, E 2016, 'Parish boundaries and the illusion of territorial continuity in landscape archaeology: the evidence from Touraine', in Ó Carragáin and Turner, 345–65.

## Resumé

### L'épée d'Eslington et le Royaume de Northumbrie par Rob Collins et Sam Turner

Des vestiges récemment mis à jour pourraient indiquer l'emplacement d'un lieu de sépulture du début du Moyen-Âge, au centre du Northumberland. Parmi les objets découverts par un détecteur de métaux, on a un assemblage comprenant une épée à lame damassée à motif et un umbo de bouclier zoomorphique. Les fouilles ont attesté de la destruction quasi-totale des dépôts du fait de l'utilisation des terres à la période post-médiévale, et seules les sépultures creusées

dans la roche remontant à l'Âge de bronze étaient intactes. Trois sépultures présumées du début du Moyen-Âge sont identifiées ici, et le plus grand assemblage est associé à un homme de haut rang. L'épée et l'umbo de bouclier de cet assemblage sont comparables à des vestiges du sud et de l'est de l'Angleterre, provenant de sépultures de haut rang. Une fois remis dans le contexte du paysage de ce site, l'assemblage fournit des traces attestant des pratiques funéraires de la nouvelle élite émergente à la fin du 6<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le Northumberland.

*Zusammenfassung***Das Eslington-Schwert und das Königreich von Northumbria** von Rob Collins und Sam Turner

Neue Entdeckungen könnten auf den Ort eines bisher unbekannten frühmittelalterlichen Gräberfeldes im zentralen Northumberland hindeuten. Zu den im Laufe einer Metalldetektorsuche gefundenen Gegenständen gehört unter anderem eine Ansammlung, die ein Schwert mit gefalteter, mustergeschweißter Klinge und eine zoomorphe Schildverzierung enthält. Ausgrabungen deuteten darauf hin, dass spätmittelalterliche Landnutzung zur beinahe völligen Zerstörung der Fundgegenstände geführt hat und nur die in das Grundgestein eingelassenen Grabstätten aus der Bronzezeit intakt geblieben sind. Drei mutmaßliche frühmittelalterliche Grabstätten werden hier identifiziert, wobei die größte Ansammlung mit einem hochrangigen Mann in Verbindung gebracht wird. Das Schwert und der Schildgriff aus dieser Ansammlung sind vergleichbar mit Funden von hochrangigen Grabstätten in Süd- und Ostengland. Zusammen mit dem landschaftlichen Kontext der Fundstätte liefert diese Ansammlung Beweise für die Begräbnispraktiken der aufkommenden Elite im Northumbria des späten 6. Jahrhunderts.

*Riassunto***La spada di Eslington e il regno di Northumbria** di Rob Collins e Sam Turner

Recenti scoperte nella Northumbria centrale individuano probabilmente la località di un sepolcreto altomedievale finora sconosciuto. Tra gli oggetti rinvenuti nel corso delle operazioni eseguite con cercametalli figura un insieme costituito da una spada forgiata con il metodo *pattern-welded* (ripiegando il metallo più e più volte) e la decorazione zoomorfa di uno scudo. Dagli scavi è emerso che la quasi completa distruzione dei depositi deriva dall'utilizzazione del terreno nel periodo post medievale e che solo le sepolture dell'età del bronzo rimasero intatte nel substrato roccioso. Qui si identificano tre sepolture presunte altomedievali, il corredo funebre più cospicuo delle quali è associato a un maschio di alto rango. La spada e la decorazione dello scudo di questo corredo sono paragonabili a ritrovamenti in sepolture di alto rango nell'Inghilterra meridionale e orientale. Il contesto paesaggistico del sito unito al corredo funebre fornisce una documentazione sulle pratiche di inumazione della élite emergente in Northumbria nel tardo VI secolo.